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Obama Makes Killer Speeches, and So Can You

by Linda Solomon

Communication coach Gail Larsen sits across from me at Cactus Club restaurant on West Broadway at Ash. After traveling from her home in Whidbey Island, Washington and facing a long, dull wait at the US-Canada border, at 3:30 p.m. she finally gets lunch. She orders chicken and salad and turns to the topic of Obama. What makes the American Democratic presidential hopeful so compelling as a speaker, she asks, taking out a notebook and a pen. What's Obama's gift?

"It's his capacity to be in the moment and connect with people," she says. She reflects on her answer for a moment and then adds: "He has the capacity to be in the moment and let his words come through, as opposed to being so rehearsed and scripted that it makes him inaccessible." "In my defenselessness lies my safety," she says, adding that she's quoting from *The Course in Miracles*. "Honestly, people want us to be available and human, not just informed."

Her lunch comes. She closes the notebook. This is going to be lunch and dinner, she says. After the meal, she will be going over to Gastown to teach a very abbreviated version of her trademark course, "Real Speaking." The Friday evening and Saturday workshop, sponsored by Hollyhock Leadership Institute, sold out days before.

"Most coaches try to fix you, I try to find you," she says, her blue eyes communicating the humour and depth she uses to inspire people to find their aliveness when they get before a crowd and start to talk, even if it terrifies them. "When you are emotionally connected with yourself, only then can you connect with others. We're so obscured by the way we're supposed to show up that even to get to be real takes some deep excavation."

In addition to being a communications coach, Larsen is a speaker, workshop leader, group facilitator and originator of events. In 1991, she founded Real Speaking, formerly Keynote Camp, to support clients in mining what she calls "the deep well of their life experience and self-expression" to become powerful platform speakers. A former executive vice president of the worldwide National Speakers Association, Larsen is also the author of *Madame Ovary: Midlife as an Art Form*. She often accepts speaking engagement in the persona of Madame Ovary.

The conversation turns to Larsen's new book, *Transformational Speaking: If You Want To Change The World Tell A Better Story* and her upcoming trip to New York City for a media blitz to promote the book. "The book is a calling card," she says. The big leaps forward happen

for people is in her 3 day intensive “Real Speaking” workshops that she limits to 6 participants. The opportunity exists to work with Larsen for April 30 through May 4 in her “Transformational Speaking” workshop at Hollyhock Workshop and Retreat Centre on Cortes Island. This workshop is for sixteen people.

“What I really want to do is promote my perspective,” she says.

Larsen’s perspective is that everyone has a story to tell, and the capacity to use their stories to make an impact that will lead to real change in the world.

“Today the stakes are high,” she writes in the introduction to the book. “It is time for many voices to be heard to stimulate dialogue and discovery. This is not the moment of singular heroes so much as it is a time for many to take single heroic actions. By telling a better story, a transformational story that awakens others to new possibilities, you plant seeds of change. The transformational story comes from deep within you and reflects what you most care about. You know it is taking wing in those moments when your audience is completely silent as they track every word, the applause is sustained, and especially when you hear later that what you said inspired change.”

The waitress clears away lunch.

“The most memorable communicators step up in their own inimitable way,” Larsen writes in the chapter of the new book that is endearingly entitled, *Be Yourself: Everyone Else is Taken*. “They avoid formulaic speaking at all costs. They understand their particular configuration of gifts, talents, and life experiences is unlike that of anyone else. The best they have to give to speaking is contained in their unique perspective. This original medicine, the source of their brilliance, springs from the heart of who they are, creating a singular pattern nowhere else to be duplicated.”

The book contains point-by-point practical advice for speakers ranging from how to check out a room before speaking to what to look for when signing a contract to how to deliver a keynote address. And, just as important, how not to.

The waitress puts down the bill and the conversation turns back to Obama. Why is he so compelling? How does he make people feel hopeful and engaged?

“What he’s got is presence. But what does it take to be present?” she asks. “The ego has to step aside. It’s the human connection,” she says. And she makes another note.